



Review of: B. Frischherz et al. Teaching Intercultural Business Ethics

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Abstract

This is a book review of: Bruno Frischherz, Liu Baocheng, Li Xiaosong, Anoosha Makka, Gordon Millar, Martin Brassler and Menno Brouwer. *Teaching Intercultural Business Ethics*. Globethics.net Education Praxis Series, Geneva: Globethics.net, forthcoming 2023.

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1. Introduction

Despite current ructions, the globalisation of the economy is a fact. Universities have the task of preparing business students to work in an international and intercultural context. The internet also provides the technical conditions for students and lecturers to work together across the boundaries set by distance and culture.

In this context, the authors of *Teaching Intercultural Business Ethics* have developed a still-running Intercultural Business Ethics (IBE) project, which aims to promote intercultural exchange and joint problem-solving. The basic idea is that students discuss ethical dilemmas from the business world in culturally mixed groups and present their joint solution proposals in a short video. In the jargon of online education this is a form of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL).

The handbook describes the organisational framework of the IBE project: mission and goals, task, cooperation between students, coaching of the groups, assessment of the work, digital tools for COIL, evaluation of the project, and concrete experiences with problems and solutions. It explains the learning aims of the project, that students from business schools with different cultural backgrounds work together on business topics, examine the related ethical aspects, and learn from each other in a subject-specific and intercultural framework. This experience should equip them with ethical principles, cultural sensitivity and decision-making tools in the globalized and interdependent business environment.

The authors from China, South Africa and Switzerland are aiming their handbook at business ethics lecturers in all parts of the world, with the intention of encouraging similar projects in this field. Divided into three main parts, “Theory of intercultural business ethics”, “Teaching of intercultural business ethics”, and “Teaching and learning with case studies”, the handbook has a distinctly “how to” feel about it and includes sample case studies and country dossiers to help those starting out with such a COIL.

2. Teaching IBE’s strengths

As a handbook, *Teaching IBE* is good at laying out how students can be motivated and organised for working together online in interculturally mixed teams on business ethics case studies. It addresses issues such as how to select ethical topics and draw dilemmas out of them, task construction, and the use of communication and learning-platform technology. It is particularly valuable in the following areas:

Firstly, team building and coaching. The former is described as requiring time and especially communications technology support. Collaboration in a COIL project is, after all, only possible using synchronous and asynchronous online channels. At the outset it is not clear among the students, not so much who wants, but who is yet capable of effectively using which tools. Coaching is therefore essential.

Secondly, in its detailed description of the process of running such a project. A wide variety of aspects, from facilitating student access, to handling the problems inherent in teamwork, to the pitfalls of the technological alternatives available when linking up students across three continents and two time zones, are (self-)critically considered.

Thirdly, assessment of student performance, an area fraught with potential difficulties when more than one university is involved. What do “sufficient” or “insufficient”, “good”, “very good”, or “excellent” performance mean in different areas of the world. *Teaching IBE* clearly argues for an assessment model which differentiates between local and COIL-wide assessment, with the latter being as simple and formative as possible.

Finally, *Teaching IBE* makes a contribution to the literature on using case studies. In addition to providing a step-by-step template for ethical discussion and decision-making, the handbook contains six such studies along with critical comments on their usefulness in the programme and suggestions for improvement. When working with case studies, students are looking for an ethical judgement. The outcome of the case analysis should be to decide on an ethical solution to the dilemma identified in the case after

collecting and analysing the material information, especially concerning the decisions made at the time.

3. Problems and controversies in Teaching IBE

If *Teaching IBE* has worthwhile input on the use of case studies to improve ethical understanding, this is also an area in which the handbook leaves matters unresolved. It does not provide an answer to the conundrum of why case studies stimulate cross-cultural communication but often fail to lead to meaningful ethical analysis.

The central problem in this respect is the issue of a common ethical framework of reference. The handbook provides good material on generic models of culture and on ethical schools of thought and theories. It makes a brave case for human rights as the common ethical ground between cultures. Human rights were declared, after all, to be universal in 1948 and inherent in this declaration was that all human beings have such rights simply by virtue of their being human. In culturally mixed groups, however, human rights can end up hotly debated and, for example, criticised as a Western obsession.

Teaching IBE admits the weakness in using human rights as common ethical ground by drawing attention to the lack of intercultural agreement on what human rights are, or more precisely to the existence of several culturally adapted versions of declarations of human rights. The alternative ethical frameworks offered, common interest, common morality, the golden rule, do not offer a convincingly better framework for all students, regardless of cultural background, to use. In a sense, of course, it would be unrealistic to expect more as this is the reality of ethics in international business.

A further and connected problem concerns the point at which students are asked to step away from ethical analysis and make a judgement. *Teaching IBE* makes reference to John Rawls's concept of reflective equilibrium, which is found to be too abstract for students and is therefore facilitated by an additional, analogous but more explicit framework. That the problem

remains unresolved is clear from *Teaching IBE*'s own critical reflections section which concedes that, in the end, Chinese students see issues in legal terms, South-African students apply a rights-based approach (while saying this would not apply in reality), and Swiss students often try to apply concepts such as equality, democracy and use of dialogue. In other words it is very difficult to get students to balance out their ethical analyses so as to agree on a conscious judgement and to stop them reverting to their pre-existing schemata.

A final problem worth mentioning, and which is reflected in the handbook, is the difficulty of carrying out a meaningful and coherent survey of student opinion about their experiences on the programme. The barriers presented by the need to fulfil different local university requirements on issues such as consent should not be underestimated. *Teaching IBE* only refers to systematic feedback given by the Swiss participants.

On balance this is a timely publication which will be of assistance to higher education professionals trying to set up and run a COIL project. It may leave unresolved some issues important to teaching intercultural business ethics, but it successfully deals in detail with many more. Students who have done the programme have, according to *Teaching IBE*, repeatedly expressed their satisfaction with their learning and intercultural experiences. As a cooperative venture between lecturers at three very different universities, IBE has and continues to work. Furthermore, and not least because of an aim expressed at the close of *Teaching IBE*, this handbook is also worthy of consideration beyond the community of ethics and intercultural studies specialists: “we would like COIL projects such as that on Intercultural Business Ethics (IBE) to contribute to the peaceful coexistence between countries and cultures”.

4. Bibliography

Bruno Frischherz, Liu Baocheng, Li Xiaosong, Anoosha Makka, Gordon Millar, Martin Brassler, Menno Brouwer, *Teaching Intercultural Business Ethics*, Globethics.net Education Praxis Series, Geneva: Globethics.net, (forthcoming) 2023.

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5. Short biography

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